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Blood Ties

by [Deminos](#)

Summary

They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Arthur's uncle Agravaine visits, and his actions cause Merlin to become further entangled with the Pendragon crime family, and Arthur to finally acknowledge something he had been denying himself for far too long.

Notes

Sorry it took so long. Sometimes it feels like life shoots you in the kneecaps when you're half a meter away from the finish line. I wanted to say thank you so much for all the encouragement and support. I never thought that this story would get so big or that people would adore it so much. Thank you for sticking by me :) Hope the update is worth the wait and I'll aim to update sooner rather than leaving it so late. One day I'll be able to take the dub-con tag off but today is not that day.

Er... more plot than porn but the next update should be more porn than plot...? I should mention that from this point, I'm not sure if future fics can be read as standalones anymore. If I've missed any warnings, please tell me.

Thank you so much to [Kayson](#) and [Etharei](#) for betaing and [leviathans moon](#) for swooping in last minute to help with the summary. :D

Detective Leon doesn't look like a police officer, with his unkempt hair and scruffy facial hair, but Lancelot supposes that's the whole point. "We're offering you and your family witness protection in exchange for information on the Pendragons. You'll be expected to testify in court when the time comes."

"I'm going to be a father soon." Lancelot cannot help but think this is oddly cliché, sitting on a park bench and pretending that he's alone when in fact a covert police detective is right next to him. "I'm scared. Of what would happen if I bring a child up in such an environment."

Leon nods in acknowledgement, takes a sip of his coffee and grimaces at the taste.

"I'm going to be selling out all my friends." He's wringing out his chauffeur's hat so much that it's no longer recognisable.

"You're not the first man to sell out his crime syndicate in exchange for a better life."

"My loyalty is with my family," Lancelot affirms. "My wife, my child." He sees the way Gwen looks at him when he comes home on late nights, covered in dirt and filth that no normal chauffeur would ever be caught dead in. She doesn't love him any less, that's never been the issue. It's the worry that eats away at her: the dread that one day he might not come home. He can't bring himself to keep doing this to her. "Arth- Mr. Pendragon has been very good to me."

Leon makes a displeased noise. "You have two choices, Mr. DuLac. Either you continue as you are, because so far, you've yet to give me any incriminating detail about the Pendragons that can be used as a bargaining chip to offer you protective custody. Or, you can call me when you're ready, and then we can make the proper arrangements. You know how to find me."

Morgana is pursing her lips in a way in a way that lets Arthur know she is absolutely *livid*. She's usually not so unhappy with him. Their monthly catch-up is something Arthur tends to look forward to, but today's subject matter has her unsurprisingly riled up.

"Agravaine."

"Uncle," Arthur corrects.

"*Your* uncle," she snarls, practically leaping upright from where she had been lounging on the settee. Her eyes gleam, anger and caution. "There is no blood shared between us."

"He is the only connection I have to my mother." Arthur has nothing of his mother, other than her genes because Uther, in a fit of despair, had destroyed anything that remotely reminded him of Ygraine. Some days, it was hard for him to even look at his own son.

Morgana sighs and Arthur shrugs her off in favour of lighting up his cigar. They've been through this before, countless times. An age old argument that will no doubt last a lifetime. "I only have you and Morgause in this world, Arthur. I'd be very sad to lose either of you."

"You're being silly." Taking off his jacket and throwing it on her, he picks up the pool stick and lines up the pool balls. "Thinking that my own uncle will kill me. Don't you think he would've done it ages ago if that were the case?"

Morgana throws the jacket onto the floor with a heavy thud and it crumples into a mess of creases

that will take an age to iron out. She snatches up a pool stick and glares. “We’re not going to argue about this again. Look at it this way: if he wasn’t your uncle, he’d be six feet under by now.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Arthur insists, stepping back as he lets her go first.

“We’re always on edge when he visits, trying to make sure he’s not going to put a bullet through your skull or a knife in your back. Gwaine’s gray hair is all your doing.”

“If he kills me, then you’d inherit.”

Morgana laughs, one of those laughs that hides the twinge of hurt she feels. “Sometimes, I think you forget that I’m an illegitimate heir.” The fact that her mother had been a glamorous singer and high class whore who found death at the bottom of a bottle had been used against her too often. Until one day, finally fed up with it, Morgana stabbed a man who had made a passing remark with a pen knife. Arthur didn’t stop her.

“Do you really think my men would not respect my wishes if I chose you as my successor? Also, I’m meant to be spending some nice, quality time with my dear sister. Could we possibly not talk about my death?”

“Oh, Arthur,” she coos. “I love you dearly.”

Finding it hard to vocalise the same sentiments, Arthur smiles in reply. “You won’t be saying that when I beat you at this game.” He’s lucky though; when it comes to Morgana, he doesn’t have to say those three words. She knows.

“I won’t be needing you this week,” Arthur says, tracing a finger along Merlin’s spine.

After their very recent bout of sex, Merlin is lying face down on the bed, lips parted as he tries to get his breathing under control. “Mhn,” he sighs, “a week free of you.”

Arthur knows he should be irritated, but it doesn’t slip past him that there’s no malice or relief in Merlin’s tone. At least, not anymore. “My uncle, Agravaine, is visiting and he’s ridiculously religious,”

“And therefore disapproves of your sodomite ways?”

He wants to pull Merlin into his arms, hold him close and hope that if he holds on long enough, that eventually they’ll become one forever and he’ll never have to part from Merlin. Such thinking unsettles him, the bothersome need to be... complete, somehow. “I’d rather not rub it under his nose. It’s bad enough that he blames my birth for his sister’s death.”

At that, Merlin shifts, lying on his side as he looks at Arthur with a frown. “If he already dislikes you, then how come you’re trying so hard to please him?”

“Because he’s family.”

Understanding flashes across Merlin’s face, followed by annoyance. This is a sore spot for Merlin, Arthur realises. Merlin, of all people, knows the potency of the bond of family. The havoc it can cause. The misery and suffering, as well as the love that is shared. His eyebrows furrow deeper, even as he closes his eyes in a half-hearted attempt to sleep.

“Gwaine will be with you, should you need him.”

Merlin snorts. “Can I expect more childish acts of jealousy from you then?”

“I wasn’t jealous.” With much reluctance, Arthur sits up, throwing the blanket aside to get up. He doesn’t bother trying to hunt down all his items of clothing strewn across the floor, and instead takes a fresh suit from his wardrobe. “Besides, Gwaine may be loose but he’s not stupid.”

Merlin gives up his attempt to sleep but makes no move to get up. “You wouldn’t seriously kill a man just because he had sex with me, would you?” he asks, burrowing deeper into the goose down duvet.

“I’d have him hung and quartered,” Arthur says curtly as he buttons up his cuffs and looks for a tie. “Tarred and feathered.”

Merlin laughs. “You’re *mad*, Arthur Pendragon. A raving mad-man.”

It’s because you bring out the worst in me, Arthur thinks, almost bitterly. You make me want to be gentle and kind. To be the best man I’m capable of, and yet, you make me want to slaughter anyone who breathes in your direction. “If anything, you’re the cause of my insanity.”

Rolling his eyes and muttering something that sounds suspiciously like ‘prat’ Merlin turns away, showing Arthur his back and going silent.

Merlin is fast asleep by the time Arthur’s finished dressing. The sheets and blankets have slipped off, pooling at the slope of Merlin’s lower back, and Arthur pulls it back up, tucking him in. “Lazy thing,” he murmurs to himself, carding his fingers through Merlin’s hair before leaving.

“Merlin, go home,” Morgana orders, accepting the glass of scotch he brings into her office.

“I’ll leave when you leave,” he says, standing awkwardly by the door. The club’s been closed for almost an hour and Merlin hasn’t been able to bring himself to leave. He’d even cleaned the already spotless tables three times before going into Morgana’s office. He’s not scared of her. It’s just that he has a hard time entering without the memory of him and Arthur defiling her office causing his heart to quicken.

The smooth scratching sound of pen on paper stops and she looks up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Why? I’m not paying you overtime.”

Merlin laughs. “I thought you could use some company, since Morgause isn’t here.”

“If you think I need protection-”

“No, no,” Merlin cuts her off. Well, yes. Because she’s been spending days talking his ear off about this crazy uncle and he now has it in his head that this Agravaine character is out to kill them all. There’s been a strange, uncomfortable roiling sensation in the pit of his stomach, which had started up a day ago. The last time he’d felt like this, someone had knocked on their door demanding money and his dad was nowhere to be found. “I was actually hoping to get a ride home?” he lies.

“My brother isn’t picking you up?” she asks, smiling in her very knowing way. “Mhn. He’s been too busy entertaining his uncle for any extra curricular activities, I suppose.”

Merlin flushes, hating that Arthur doesn't have a subtle bone in his body, which means everyone in their immediate circle *knows*.

"Make yourself comfortable. Morgause will be here within the hour. She has some errands to run."

The way Morgana says "errands" implies it has nothing to do with the typical things, like getting groceries or going to the postal office, but more along the lines of broken bones and people rolled up in carpet or in watery graves.

"Do you have anything to do?"

Merlin shrugs, helping himself to some of Morgana's very expensive scotch. He pours a finger of the golden liquid into the crystal glass with a flourish, before topping Morgana's glass up. This isn't the first time they've done this, spending time alone together while Morgause was out running "errands". He can't really recall when it first started, the boundary between boss and employee, debtor and debtee blurring and fraying at the edges.

She looks surprised, but in a good way. "Do you know- you've such a sweet face on you, I didn't think you drink."

"I'm a bartender!" Merlin splutters. He makes a personal resolve to not tell her how much of a lightweight he is. "I can drink."

Morgana smiles, pushing the paperwork away as she leans into her chair. "I'm not sure if it's because my brother is finally getting his rocks off regularly--"

Merlin spits out his scotch, one hand at his mouth while the other frantically scrambled for a handkerchief from his pocket.

"Or if it's actually your presence. Maybe it's both, but he's been..." she trails off with a frown, as if having trouble grasping the word she was looking for. "Soft," she continues quietly, and her nose wrinkles, as if finding such a thing distasteful. "Soft isn't good for the family business. It can get you killed."

"Good," Merlin huffs.

She laughs, loudly and amused in a way that clearly shows she doesn't believe him one, single bit. "But he is happier, and that's all that really matters to me." Then she looks at him, gaze sharp and dissecting. "I would hate it if anything were to crush that softness."

It takes Merlin a moment to realise what she's trying to hint at and he's shocked. "Are you," he says, almost dumbly. "Are you telling me not to.. to what? Not break his heart?" The woman must be delusional. It's almost as if she doesn't realise that the thing between he and Arthur is nothing more than paid sex. It's almost as if...she thinks Arthur *actually* cares. "Morgana. I don't know what you think is going on between your brother and I, but--"

"I don't know what is going on," she cuts off. "And I don't want to. Just..." there's a glint of concern in those dazzling eyes. Morgana may be the younger sister, but she has always acted like an older one. "Take good care of him."

There's a flash of annoyance but it's easily drowned out by the admiration he feels for her. "You're a good sister, Morgana," he says. "I've never, ever met a woman quite like you."

"I can assure you that you have. Many, in fact," she replies. "They just didn't know you well

enough to allow you to see that side of them.”

Arthur doesn't last a week.

Though he loathes to admit it, it's not even the sex he misses the most. It's Merlin's presence in and of itself. The thought does not sit well with him, that his state of mind and well being are so heavily dependant on someone else. It angers him, almost, this realisation.

"I thought we weren't going to see each other this week," Merlin says in the middle of stacking up the chairs and closing down the club for the night.

"Changed my mind." Arthur shrugs, sitting on one of the sofas and using a clean ashtray to rest his cigar.

Merlin frowns, taking a moment to stare at Arthur before resuming his job. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up to his elbows, showing off lean arms which Arthur duly appreciates. "Shouldn't you be entertaining your conniving uncle?"

"I see Morgana's been talking."

"A bit," Merlin admits. "Well, more ranting than talking. She's worried."

"It's not her place to worry."

Merlin snorts, placing a chair on the table with a bit more force than necessary. "We don't get to decide those things, Arthur."

Arthur knows that Merlin's referring to his mother and no doubt his father. The man who Merlin somehow still cares about despite burdening Merlin with such debt. A bleeding heart will get a person killed in their world, but Merlin isn't part of their world. Not really. He's just some poor sod trapped in a corner with no way out. "Are you worried about me, darling?" Arthur teases.

"Not at all," Merlin says too quickly.

Even though they're the only people present, even though Merlin is only halfway across the bar, Arthur feels as if there's too much distance between them. "Merlin", he says commandingly, parting his legs. "Come here."

"Can't you just wait for me to close up first?" Merlin pleads, exasperated. "I'm going to keel over from exhaustion if I have to stay here any longer."

"Merlin," Arthur repeats, even though his voice softer this time, his tone isn't any less willful. "Come. Here."

Merlin obeys, knowing it's in his best interests. He settles into Arthur's lap, tangling his fingers at the soft hair at the nap of Arthur's neck.

"I can tell when you're lying. Your face is ridiculously expressive, did you know that?" Unable to deny himself any longer, Arthur tugs the hem of Merlins' shirt out of his pants with one hand and undoes the clasp on Merlin's belt. He's been itching to touch Merlin, to taste him for the past four days, craving as if he were some sort of addict. "It must be your ears." He nips on one for emphasis, greedily taking in the sound of Merlin's hitched breath.

"Anyone would have a hard time killing a prat like you," Merlin's whispering, voice low and intimate. "You're going to live long enough to go senile, no doubt."

Arthur hums, only half listening as he nuzzles Merlins jaw, giving him hickeys that can't be covered up by flimsy neck scarves or shirt collars. "We're trying something new today," he says, shamelessly shoving a hand into Merlin's pants, grasping at the growing erection.

"Is that why you wanted to see me today? You just wanted to get your rocks off?"

"Why else would I need to see you?" Arthur replies callously, pushing Merlin away to stand up.

"You can't seriously have that little self control." Merlin scowls, but doesn't fight Arthur who— for some reason— is herding him towards the juke-box. "You need to be reacquainted with your right hand."

Arthur laughs, shoving Merlin roughly against the juke-box. "Again. Why would I need to? That's your job."

"You're an awful human being."

"I know." Arthur kisses Merlin, loving how Merlin just accepts it, how he so easily parts his lips to allow Arthur access. Arthur can feel it, the moan that vibrates in Merlin's chest when Arthur sweeps his tongue across the roof of Merlin's mouth in a certain way. When they part, Arthur nips at Merlin's bottom lip, scrapping a sharp canine across the sweet bow. "Stay," he orders.

Merlin nods, gasping for air and licking at his kiss-swollen lips.

It doesn't take long to rummage behind the bar to retrieve the coil of heavy rope that's stored there for miscellaneous purposes.

Merlin doesn't struggle when Arthur holds up his hand, knotting the rope effectively, not too tight or too loose.

"This isn't going to hurt, is it?" he asks, eying the rope around his wrist warily.

"You're going to be fine," Arthur says, even though he knows he doesn't have to reassure Merlin. He loops a long length of the rope around the jukebox, bringing the other end back to tie Merlin's other wrist. "But if you're really that much of a scaredy cat, darling. Just tell me to stop, and I will."

"I can't move," he complains, tugging at the ropes of emphasis.

"Merlin," Arthur says, unbuttoning Merlin's shirt and fly. "That's the whole point. Now, take your trousers off."

Merlin looks at him as if he's daft before tugging at the ropes again. "And how do you suppose I do that?"

"You can figure it out." Then, because he's merciful, Arthur places his hands on the jutting bones of Merlin's hips and caresses the taut flesh with his thumbs before slowly nudging Merlin.

Finally getting the picture, Merlin sways his hips. The band of his trousers slip down slightly.

"There you go." Arthur whispers.

"Arthur." He's trying so hard to shimmy out of his pants, but his movement is limited with Arthur

so close. "This is embarrassing-" he's cut off, sentence turning into a groan as Arthur rubs against him.

"At least I didn't make you wear stockings as well." He's having so much fun, teasing those small noises out of Merlin. Breaking him apart, bit by tiny bit.

Merlin's eyes are clenched shut, biting at his lower lip as he tries valiantly to sway his hips, only to be held down or pressed against when Arthur deems his movement too fast. "S-small mercies. Arthur."

"Hmn?" Arthur can feel the precome making the front of his pants damp. His cock aches, soothed only by the occasional rubbing against Merlin who's writhing and squirming like some wanton siren, desperately needing to be ravished.

Futilely, he pulls at the restraints. "Prat!" Merlin chokes out, gasping. "Clotpole!"

Arthur ruts against him harshly, but only for a moment. Just enough to show Merlin what he's missing out on. "I'm sure that's not what you were trying to say, were you?" he says, reaching up to toy with a delectable nipple, pinching it sharply. "*Merlin.*"

"*Please.*"

Arthur chuckles, leaning down to lap at the abused flesh before blowing on the stiffened nub. "You can do better than that." Because he knows there's more coming up, Arthur decides to be merciful, allowing the trousers to pool to the floor before dragging Merlin's boxers down.

Arthur palms at Merlin's cock, thumbing the dribbling head, and getting his fingers slick with precome.

At the touch, Merlin's eyes flicker close and he tilts his head back.

Arthur trails his free hand across Merlin's stomach, up his chest to lightly grasp at his neck, feeling the way Merlin's adam's apple bops as he gets in heaving gulps of air. "How long do you think you could last?" Arthur asks, slowly jerking Merlin off. "How long do you think I can *make* you last?"

Arthur knows Merlin's body like the back of his hand. He stops, gripping the base of Merlin's cock just before he comes.

Surprised at his halted orgasm, Merlin lets out a frustrated growl, raw and needy. "*Arthur.*"

"Not yet." Arthur continues his ministrations only when he's sure the edge of Merlin's desire has dulled. He plays with the soft sack of Merlin's balls, runs a finger along the thick vein of Merlin's cock before continuing his ministrations. Underneath his fingertips on Merlin's throat, Arthur can feel the rapid thrumming of Merlin's pulse.

Eyes wet, Merlin shoots him a heated glare that promises some form of retribution at a later date.

"Don't worry, darling," he whispers, leaning up to nip at Merlin's ears. "You'll get to come. Promise."

"But when?" is what Merlin pants out, gnawing at his lip in frustration when he isn't gasping through them.

Putting on an exaggerated expression of contemplation, Arthur once again squeezes the base of Merlin's cock. "Not until I allow you to." It's a wonder that Merlin still has anything left to give.

There's so much precome on Arthur's fingers, making the slide up and down slick and smooth.

Arthur doesn't know how long he teases Merlin for. All he knows is that Merlin's so far gone, so lost in his need for release, that his legs are barely keeping him upright. He's only able to stand because of the hand on his neck and Arthur against him. Arthur's standing so close, he can feel the shiver of Merlin's weakening knees against his own.

Arthur takes away the hand on Merlin's neck and steps back. Because he considers himself to be an upstanding gentleman, he does as promised, bringing Merlin off with quick, efficient flicks of his wrist.

Merlin comes, letting out a long, drawn out moan as relief and euphoria cross his face. With nothing left to hold him up, he slides down the jukebox, falling to his knees in a useless, boneless heap.

Standing above him, Arthur unbuttons his trousers, reaching for his cock and giving it long, snug pulls. "Come on, darling," he murmurs, cupping Merlin's chin, holding his face up as Arthur trails his cock along the sharp sweep of Merlin's cheekbone, nudges it against the soft swell of Merlin's bottom lip.

Merlin sticks his tongue out, a soft, tentative lap at the slit of his cock. Arthur breathes in sharply, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth in disapproval. "Not today." He says, continuing to rub the head of his cock against Merlin's lips.

Still in his own haze of pleasure, Merlin only watches with glazed over eyes as Arthur begins to masturbate, leisurely stroking, watching the way his cock taps against Merlin's face. Drops of precome form at the slit, dribbling down and sticking to Merlin's lips, his cheekbones. Arthur's orgasm comes to him quickly and he paints Merlin's face in streaks of white.

"Arthur!" Merlin splutters, sounding absolutely scandalised as he tries to shake his head.

Arthur only tightens his grip on Merlin's chin, stopping him from moving because he wants to look a bit longer.

He wonders if Merlin realises how, for a moment, the tables are turned. There's a sense of triumph in seeing Merlin like this. Marked and owned. Tied to the jukebox with his face flushed a heady red, clothes rumpled and damp with sweat, clinging to pale flesh. His now flaccid cock peeking out between folds of fabric, shining and slick with his own come. Ruined and vulnerable is what comes to mind and Arthur cannot help but approve, cannot help but think this is fair somehow because as he is, on his knees and subjugated... it's exactly how Arthur feels, in a way. As if he doesn't belong to himself, not anymore. because the heart beating in his chest is no longer solely his to own, but monopolised by this man before him.

As it turns out, Morgana has every right to worry, though she's been worrying for the wrong person this whole time.

Merlin doesn't know how it happened. One moment he's taking out the rubbish, frowning when he realises that he doesn't have to use the key to open the back door. Upon closer inspection, he finds tape covering the latch bolt that would automatically lock the door when closed. Dread, ice cold and metallic slicks down his spine and he wrenches the door open, rushing inside, telling himself that he's just overreacting, there had been no one other than Morgana when he left so

surely, *surely*-

He sees her, being held against the bar by a man clothed in black. Knife plunged deep into her stomach. Her eyes are wide, mouth wordlessly gaping open as she tries to grab onto the man's hand, attempting to pull the knife free.

Without thinking, and blind with panic, Merlin rushes towards the man, tackling him to the floor. He gets punched in the face for his efforts and for a moment stars obscure his vision. Sharp pangs of pain flood his senses along with the coppery taste of blood in his mouth.

At the corner of his eye he sees Morgana sliding down the bar, looking at the weapon still embedded in her with blind shock. Her shaky fingers hover over the handle.

"*Don't!*" Merlin calls out, hoping that she understands, that she doesn't pull the knife out because at the moment, it's the only thing keeping her from bleeding out.

A punch to the gut takes the air out of him and he's pulled up, thrown against the table, knocking over the glasses he's yet to clean up. He regrets it now as they shatter and cut into him.

The man returns his attention to Morgana and it gives Merlin a few precious moments to gather himself, to charge again, but this time with a plan. He manages to aim a few punches to the man's kidney, his solar plexus, and there's a moment of pride when the man doubles over. It's short-lived because, once again, he's thrown against the table and more shards of glass become acquainted with his back.

The man doesn't turn to Morgana this time. This time, it looks like he wants to finish Merlin off once and for all.

Merlin's still on the floor, desperately trying to get up, when gloved hands wrap around his neck, cutting off his air.

He wheezes, gasps; what little air he has left leaves him in a gurgle. He has to free himself somehow, buy them enough time because Morgause will be here soon, he just has to buy them... enough... time.

Merlin can feel his body becoming heavier and the edges of his vision growing blurry, like frost consuming window panes. His hand becomes too heavy, falling to the floor painfully as he meets a broken glass.

An idea comes to him and he realises what he needs to do. It's just he really doesn't want to. He's not ready for this, will never be ready for this. But what other choice does he have? The glass cuts into him when he wraps his fingers around it and with the last remaining residue of his strength, Merlin swings his arm up and plunges the glass into the man's neck.

The hands leave his neck and the man grasps at the shard of glass, tugging. A mistake, because blood spurts from the wound, a fountain of bright crimson. He scrabbles at his neck, trying to quell the bleeding to no effect.

Blood falls on him, splatters of heat, and Merlin squeezes his eyes shut to avoid most of it. He has to get to Morgana. It's pathetic, half crawling, half dragging himself to where she's still sitting, thankfully alive. Every breath he takes is full of agony, his windpipes are adamantly protesting having to be used, and his back aches, his own blood making the fabric sticky.

"Morgana," he says, with barely any breath let alone audibility. "Oh god." He's in so much pain and there's a buzzing in his ears as the adrenaline continues to run through his veins, charges of lightning pulses that keep him going. "You're going to be okay," he says, looking around for any

type of fabric he can use to staunch the bleeding. Everything is too far away and with small, pained noises he takes off his own bloodied shirt, twisting it into a bandage before curling it around the knife wound.

“Merlin?” Morgana says, sounding small and unsure. She lets out a shriek of pain when he presses down.

“You’re going to be okay,” Merlin says, whispering promises he’s not sure he can keep. “Morgause will be here soon. Arthur will come. He’s going to kill us for ruining his bar.”

“Mine,” she croaks out with a wet smile. “My bar.”

“We’re never going to hear the end of it. He’s going to be such a prat about this.”

“You can,” she’s crying now, her mascara a mess as it runs down streaks down her cheeks in streaks of black. “Fix that. I’m sure.”

“I don’t think any amount of sex will fix his awful personality.”

She laughs but gasps when that causes her more pain.

“You’re going to be okay. It’s you, Morgana. When are you never not okay?” he says with a small smile. He’s getting worried, more than he already is, by the blood that soaks his shirt at an alarming rate.

He’s never been happier to see Morgause at the door. Her usual stoic face has melted into an expression of horror and shock. Knowing that she’s more than capable of taking care of things from here, Merlin takes it as his cue to allow himself to give into the siren’s song of unconsciousness. The last thing he sees before the lull of darkness drowns him, is Morgause’s ashen face, the dead body a few feet away, and his own hands caked in Morgana’s blood.

Sometimes, if he's able to stare long enough, Arthur tries to see if there are traces of his mother in his uncle.

It's almost shameful, how little he knows about his mother. He knows it's not really his fault. She'd taken her last breath the same time he'd taken his very first. It's only from whispered stories that he'd been able to piece together a few things about her. Such as the fact that she was kind and gentle of heart. This quality had been able to dull down the sharpness of Uther's ruthlessness. When she died, she took his heart with her, leaving him bereft and with a child in her splitting image.

Arthur sees nothing of her in his uncle. Especially in this very moment, his face bloodied beyond recognition and so neatly tied up within the trunk of the car. He's barely breathing, but there's just enough life in him to draw out a very long and painful death. Arthur isn't a sadist, but there's a tiny part within him that feels as if this is some form of justice.

He'd almost lost his sister. He'd almost lost Merlin. And all because of this mangy traitor before him.

“I love you, mate, but I have to say, the work hours are shite,” Gwaine complains, leaning against the car as he takes a drag of his cigarette. The tiny orange flame is so very bright in the pitch black of the barren night.

"I'm your uncle," Agravaire wheezes. "Your mother's dearest and only brother." It's almost amusing, how high-pitched and nasally he sounds because of the broken nose, courtesy of Gwaine.

"Not good enough." Arthur himself would've loved to have been the one to do the deed. Beat this piece of human filth to within an inch of his life. But appearances must be kept. Long gone are the days when he was naive and needing to prove himself through blood and pain. He is Arthur Pendragon, son of Uther Pendragon. It isn't fitting, someone of his stature doing the dirty work.

It is beneath him.

Instead, all he is able to do is voice orders and live vicariously through his men as they act out his wishes.

"Aw, sure you don't want to throw one itty bitty punch?" Gwaine offers with a tight smile. "He really had it coming." He doesn't enjoy this, either. Arthur can tell, but this is something that must be done for the sake of their family. They mustn't look weak, and betrayal can only be punished by death, blood relation or not.

Arthur wants to, he desperately wants to, but they're not alone. Lancelot is watching from the front car seat and Percy is close by, intimidating force that he is. "And dirty my clothes? Because of Agravaire, Morgana now has an horrid scar. He shudders to contemplate the trauma and damage to her mind and Merlin... he hasn't seen Merlin in more than two weeks. A new record, but not one his own volition."

"I hope my next paycheck has a bonus. This is silk, you know?" Gwaine grumbles, trying to flick off a speck of blood on his waistcoat to no avail. "Percy, mate, you're taking me to that bar after this. It's been a shite week."

"Stop wearing expensive clothes to work then," Arthur's fingers itch, not for a cigar, or even the trigger of a gun but for the softness of Merlin's skin.

"Are you crazy?" Gwaine asks, as he closes the trunk with a loud thump. "Everyday is a work day. Are you suggesting I dress like some sort of... classless scoundrel for the rest of my life?"

"You are a scoundrel," Percy points out.

Letting out an overzealous snort of derision, Gwaine rolls his eyes. "Doesn't mean I have to dress like one."

"Can we just get on with it?" Arthur orders sharply. The nicotine is acting as very poor and ineffective replacement for what he's truly craving. "I have things to do."

"Don't we all? Alright, Perce." Gwaine throws the car keys to Percival, already opening the door to the passenger seat. "My knuckles are killing me."

Arthur can still hear them bickering when he gets into his own car.

"I'm sorry," Lancelot says, looking at Arthur from the rearview mirror. "I know how important he was to you."

Arthur shrugs, butting out his cigar with more force than necessary. "These things happen. It's all part of the family business. Go to the club. Is Merlin working tonight?"

"He's been back to his usual schedule for the past four nights."

Arthur nods, pleased. "Congratulations on Gwen getting pregnant, by the way."

"Thank you," Lancelot says, voice already full of pride as well as apprehension which is apparently normal when it comes to first time parents. "She's due in six months."

"Babies need a crib, right? Bassinets?"

"Among over things. Clothing, formula, a changing table, toys-" he falters. "No, Arthur, you can't-" he begins.

"Babies don't sound cheap. Let me help. Consider it a bonus for having to chauffeur Merlin everywhere as well as me."

"You really don't have to," Lancelot insists.

"I want to." Sometimes, Arthur doesn't quite know what they're doing in this world. Gwen and Lancelot. They're two of the most kindhearted people he's ever known. Then again, there are a lot of kind – once noble - hearts that have gotten tangled in the barbed wires of crime with no possibility of ever being free. Lancelot may have been hired as a chauffeur, but his hands aren't exactly clean of blood.

Lancelot looks like he really wants to argue the issue, as if accepting help somehow means he's less of a father or a man.

"He'll be the closest thing I'll have to a niece or nephew," Arthur says, hoping to quell whatever reason Lancelot has of not accepting the money. "Therefore, he should be spoilt rotten." Though, with such loving parents, the child already has a promising future. "Come back in two hours," he says, closing the door and patting the roof of the car before walking away.

The club's back to its original state of glamour. The hardwood floors have been polished and cleaned of any blood and not a single splinter of wood or shard of glass can be found on the premises. No one would believe that there had been a failed assassination attempt a few days prior.

"I thought I asked you to leave me alone," Merlin says, not even bothering to look at Arthur as he stacks chairs on the tables.

"You did," Arthur agrees. "And I did; for two weeks. But you seem to have forgotten about this little contract you have with me."

"Oh. Yes." Merlin says, monotone and distant. "How could I?"

It's not annoyance that flares within him, it's concern. "What on earth is wrong with you?" Arthur asks, storming up to Merlin, grasping him by the wrist and instantly regretting it when Merlin winces in pain.

"I'm *fine*," Merlin grits out, still avoiding eye contact.

"I'm not stupid, *Merlin*," Arthur retorts, he softens his grip, but doesn't let go completely. He brings his other hand to Merlin's neck, fingering the collar-

"*Don't*," Merlin says, trying to jerk away slightly. It comes out more like a choked whisper than anything defiant. He's staring at Arthur's glove clad hands, full of fear, as if expecting them to grow teeth and attack at any given moment.

It clicks for Arthur then. "Merlin. Merlin," he repeats, trying to sound gentle and at the same time,

crushing the hot anger he feels, knowing that someone has instilled this fear in Merlin. "I'm not going to hurt you." He lets go, only briefly, just long enough to take off the leather gloves, letting them drop to the floor.

Merlin relaxes, but only a little. At least he doesn't flinch when Arthur runs his hands along the collar of Merlin's shirt, undoing the bowtie and a button. "It's my fault." He parts the shirt, revealing Merlin's neck. Finger shaped bruises collar his throat, a temporary brand of ugly purples and yellows that mar his neck. "I let it slip to my uncle that if anything happened to me then Morgana would be next in line." He gingerly touches the bruises, warmer than the rest of Merlin's skin. "He thought that killing Morgana would fix that. Then, he was going to kill me when I was too busy wallowing in grief for my dear sister to notice."

Merlin shivers when Arthur trails the back of his knuckles along the fine bones of Merlin's sternum. "Why are you telling me this?" Merlin mumbles, finally looking up at Arthur. "It has nothing to do with me."

"It would've worked if it hadn't been for you."

"You're exaggerating." Merlin tries to look away again, only this time Arthur cups his face, making him unable to look anywhere that isn't Arthur's face.

"No. If you hadn't-

It seems like something in Merlin snaps, because he breaks away, tearing himself away from Arthur's grip. "I killed someone because of you!" he shouts, angry and hurt. "It was either him or me and I had to choose and that would've never happened if I hadn't ever met you!" And then he's suddenly so close, reminding Arthur that Merlin is taller by a few, scant inches. "And," he chokes up, eyes welling with tears. "And I *knew*, how important she was to you, and how it would've killed you if anything had happened to her. And I *cared*, Arthur. I *cared* about the wellbeing of a selfish, morally gray, bastard of a man who-

"If I were a better man." Arthur pulls him into an sudden embrace, nudging Merlin's head so that it rested upon Arthur's shoulder. Such an act doesn't go past him, the fact Merlin has killed for him speaks louder than anything else. "I would let you go, call this even," he says softly, he tightens his grip, feeling the bandages cover Merlin's back through his thin, white shirt. "But I'm not. I'm worse than the selfish bastard you believe me to be." Merlin's tears dampen his shoulder and Arthur feels the pang of pain as Merlin angrily digs his nails into Arthur's back. "I can't let you go. Merlin," he says. Already he's terrified of the words he's about to say, because he's never had to say them before, had never even been *able* to say them, to anyone, not even his sister, but what else can he do? Merlin may not have said it, but committing a murder, even in self defense... The least Arthur can do is give Merlin something in return.

"Merlin. I love you," he says, knowing that such an admittance could potentially, eventually, lead to his ruin.

Once again, I'm sorry for making you guys wait so long for this update. Thank you for reading!

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